

# **Security issues affecting occupational safety of receptionists in Helsinki city centre hotels**

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<b>Tekijä</b> Ann-Mari Hämäläinen	<b>Ryhmä tai aloitusvuosi</b> 2008
<b>Opinnäytetyön nimi</b> Security issues affecting occupational safety of receptionists in Helsinki city centre hotels	<b>Sivu- ja liitesivumäärä</b> 28+3
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<p>Matkailun turvallisuus on yhä enemmän pinnalla, sillä levottomuudet ovat lisääntyneet maailmanlaajuisesti. Hotelli on työympäristönä erityisen haastava, sillä hotelliin on pääsy vuorokauden ympäri.</p> <p>Tämän opinnäytetyön tarkoituksena on löytää tärkeimmät hotellivastaanottovirkailijoiden työturvallisuuteen vaikuttavat tekijät ja uhat. Tulosten pohjalta annetaan kehitysehdotuksia turvallisuuden parantamiseksi.</p> <p>Tutkimus rajattiin koskemaan Helsingin ydinkeskustan hotelleja. Kyselylomakkeen avulla kartoitettiin vastaanottotyössä koettuja riskejä, uhkatilanteita, sekä niiden vaikutuksia työntekijään ja työyhteisöön. Tutkimus toteutettiin marraskuun alussa 2013, ja siihen osallistui vastaanottovirkailijoita 14 hotellista.</p> <p>Teoreettinen viitekehys koostuu turvallisuskäsitteistä, työturvallisuudesta, turvallisuusjohtamisesta ja työväkivallasta.</p> <p>Tutkimustulokset osoittivat, että vastaanottotyöskentely on joskus turvatonta. Suurin osa vastaajista on kokenut uhkaavia tilanteita ja ihmisiä, fyysistä uhkaa (lyöminen, potkiminen) ainakin kerran, sekä lähes kaikki solvausta tai uhkailua. Vastaanottovirkailijan oma käytös, asiakaspalvelutaidot sekä vuorovaikutustaidot auttavat uhkaavien tilanteiden hoitamisessa. Työyhteisön tuki ja apu ovat myös lisäävät turvallisuutta.</p> <p>Parannuskohteista tärkeimmäksi nousi säännöllisen koulutuksen lisääminen, yksintyöskentelyn vähentäminen, sekä vartija aulaan.</p>	
<b>Asiasanat</b> hotelli, turvallisuus, työturvallisuus, uhka, työväkivalta, asiakaspalvelu	

Degree programme in Tourism

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<p>Safety in tourism is more and more under discussion as restlessness has increased worldwide. Hotel as a working environment is exceptionally challenging as it needs to be accessible 24 hours a day.</p> <p>The aim of this thesis is to identify the main factors and threats affecting hotel receptionists' employee safety. Improvement suggestions to improve safety are drawn based on the results of the research.</p> <p>The research was limited to Helsinki city centre hotels. The research data was collected with a questionnaire survey to receptionists from 14 hotels, to find out about threats and threatening situations in receptionist work, and their affects on the employee and the work community. The survey was conducted in the beginning of November 2013.</p> <p>The theoretical framework consists of safety, occupational safety, safety management and violence at work.</p> <p>The results of the research showed that working as a receptionist can sometimes be unsafe. Most of the respondents had experienced threatening situations and people, physical threats at least once. In addition, almost all of them had experienced verbal abuse and threatening. Receptionist's own behaviour, customer service skills and interaction skills help in dealing with threatening situations. The support of colleagues and the work community improve safety, as well.</p> <p>The most important improvement subjects were increasing training, decreasing working alone, and having a security guard during nights.</p>	
<b>Key words</b> safety, security, occupational safety, threat, violence at work, customer service	

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# 1 Introduction

The threat of violence in tourism is constantly in the news as terrorist attacks to tourist locations are increasing, alongside with growing international instability. As tourism has grown, so have the safety problems and they have become more complex.

The topic of this thesis is employee safety in hotel receptions in Helsinki city centre. Safety issues in tourism are mainly discussed only from the tourist aspect; whether a location is safe for tourists, the risks they may encounter etc. Therefore, I felt it was important to examine the topic from the employees' point of view. Working as a hotel receptionist myself, I have come across with difficult and threatening situations, and have therefore become interested to find out how other receptionists consider this side of their work.

The research will be limited to hotels in Helsinki city centre. As it is the most hectic area in Finland, safety issues have an especially big role. Problems are diverse and complex, and very different from those in quieter areas. It will focus on threats and occupational safety, but ergonomics and such will not be discussed. The hotels in Helsinki city centre have to deal with challenges due to the vast clientele and large crowds entering the hotel throughout the day. The bustling city with a lot of tourists, business customers, and especially unwanted outsiders and by-passers who are hard to keep out of hotel premises cause challenges.

The objective of this thesis is to raise awareness on the safety issues concerning receptionist, and the affects they have on the employees. From results, I will draw conclusions and find solutions and improvement suggestions to the main safety problems. The findings and the improvement suggestions will be such that any hotel can use and implement them, and take them into account when planning or developing their safety procedures and policies. This includes both orientation to new employees and training of old employees. The findings will also help new receptionists prepare for the work as they can transfer the suggested methods into their work. They will also be able to demand information and safety training, in case those issues have been neglected in orientation.

The objective is also to find out how safe hotel receptionists consider their work as a whole; their work environment and the work community – whether or not they offer support in risky situations. The factors that most affect their sense of security will be discussed, as well, and if and how breaches in safety affect the employees and the work environment. In addition, the thesis will focus on how the employees perceive safety risks and accidents, and the consequences and the aftermath. If there has been an accident or a dangerous situation, how well has it been dealt with by the management, and has there been counselling or psychiatric help from occupational health care services, if needed.

Thesis is not done as a commission to any hotel as the aim is to examine the overall situation in the city centre hotels, and not be limited to one specific hotel only. Therefore the research take will be broader, too, and not affected or limited by individual challenges that a specific hotel might have, for example related to its poor security plan or shortcomings in some other areas. In addition, hotels and companies in general do not want to be associated with a negative subject as this one, as it might create a bad image to customers and employees.

The thesis will be research-oriented study. The method used will be quantitative research in form of survey with both closed and open ended questions, thus including some qualitative research into the thesis, as well. The theory will be based on books on work safety, internet sources, surveys to receptionists, and personal knowledge and observation since I work at a hotel reception, myself.

## **2 Work environment**

### **2.1 Safety and security**

It is important to make a distinction between safety and security. The Oxford Dictionary defines safety as “the condition of being protected from or unlikely to cause danger, risk, or injury.” (Oxford Dictionaries a.) Security is defined as “the state of being free from danger or threat; the state of feeling safe, stable, and free from fear or anxiety; procedures followed or measures taken to ensure the security of a state or organization.” (Oxford Dictionaries b.) They are basically synonyms and the difference is really small. One way to look at it is that security is external factors that create the feeling of safety.

Security means protecting people, assets or environment from threats, whereas safety is protection against hazards (Albrechtsen 2003, 3-4). Security incidents are created by people with malicious intentions, safety incidents are the unplanned results of human behaviour. Threats to safety are also more tangible and observable (Albrechtsen 2003, 7). In this thesis word safety is used as a common noun to describe these both, and security only when talking about security companies.

### **2.2 Occupational safety**

Alli (2008, 7) defines occupational safety as “the science of the anticipation, recognition, evaluation and control of hazards arising in or from the workplace that could impair the well-being of workers, taking into account the possible impact on the surrounding communities and the general environment.” A company is responsible for ensuring a safe work environment and having safety plans that fill the laws and regulations (Rautiainen & Siiskonen 2011, 329).

Safety is an important basic need, as shown in the figure below which illustrates Maslow’s theory of hierarchy of needs (Research history 2012). The most important needs have to be filled before a person can start to pursue fulfilment to other, less vital needs. The most fundamental needs are physiological, such as breathing, food and

sleep. Safety and security are next on the pyramid. After these essential aspects of a person's life are in order, one can start to strive for the "higher" needs such as love and belonging, self-esteem and finally self-actualization. The fulfilment of the basic needs is vital for person's wellbeing.

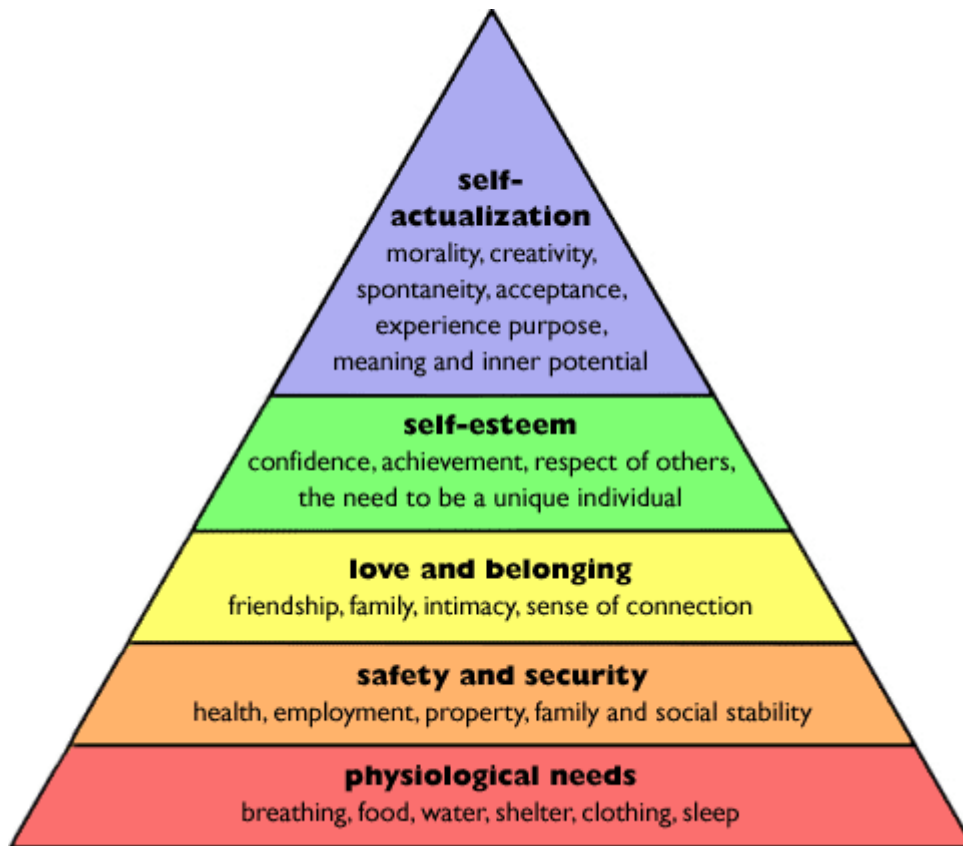


Figure 1. Manslow's hierarchy of needs. (Research History 2012)

Safety also reflects to employee satisfaction, stress level, and work performance, which further reflect to service quality and customer satisfaction. A staff that feels safe in their workplace is more affective as they can only focus on their work, rather than worrying about their safety. (Isotaulus & Saarela 2007, 8). Therefore, good occupational safety is beneficial not only to the wellbeing of the staff, but for productivity, too, as Hesapro partners (2013, 5) mention "--improving quality of working life and rising productivity do tend to go hand in hand." Taking care of the quality of work conditions is also a part of responsible business (The Ministry of Employment and the Economy). Proper safety management is ultimately an investment for staff well-being, but also productivity and efficiency.



## **2.3 Safety management**

There are internal and external safety systems, and management needs to combine them into a functioning entity. Internal factors are the actual work place and accessibility, work ergonomics, work community, management and in-house safety policies. The latter includes the handling of money and confidential material, for example. External factors are safety companies and the rescue plans that they have made for the hotel, technological security systems, and outsourced guarding. (Rautiainen & Siiskonen 2011, 330.)

Safety policy is a proactive operational tool, and every company needs to have a plan for emergencies, fire, accidents, and an evacuation. It is employer's responsibility to create safety plans based on risk assessment, implement them, and ensure that the staff knows and follows the safety rules and procedures (Isotalus & Saarela 2007, 64).

## **2.4 Safety training**

Safety training is the most important way to prepare the staff on how to act in emergencies and unexpected situations. It is often just an overlooked part of orientation and done superficially, i.e. going through only the necessary fire escapes etc. and the location of safety equipment. Due to the nature and seasonality of the tourism industry, some of the employments are short, and especially in those cases safety training easily gets neglected.

Threat of violence is often disregarded, too, as not to scare the new employee, even though there should be clear procedure and guidance on how to act in those kind of situations. According to Isotalus and Saarela (2007, 9-11), joint rules and policies, space planning, technological tools, e.g. alarm systems, training and rehearsing situations are vital in preventing violence.

It is beneficial to have predefined steps to follow, so that when something actually happens, one has clear steps to follow. This also gives confidence in one's abilities in managing and being in control of events. (Isotalus & Saarela 2007, 11.) The old employees

need regular training, as well, to keep things fresh in mind, but there are often shortcomings, ultimately due to cost factors.

## **2.5 Violence at work**

Violence at work is “any work-related situation in which an employee is hurt by verbal or physical abuse or the threat of violence, directly or indirectly jeopardizing his/her safety, well-being and health”. Violence or threat of it may come from colleagues, as well, though this is rarer. They affect the employees’ work abilities. (The Finnish Institute of Occupational Health 2010a.)

Violence at work can happen at the workplace, on the way to work, on a business trip or on any work-related situations. The situations are always individual, and can include for example yelling, throwing objects, verbal abuse and insults, grabbing, pushing, kicking, and verbal or physical threatening. (Isotalus & Saarela 2007, 6.)

## **2.6 Work community**

Work community offers support in terms of advice and knowledge, but mental support, too. One should be able to rely on colleague’s help in challenging situations and in the aftermath. The other person’s presence, alone, can often bring confidence and authority when dealing with difficult customers.

Work community is a delicate entity. Disruptions, such as accidents affect the dynamics easily. Threatening situations and violence affect not only the victim, but the entire work community and atmosphere. Unfortunate events raise the safety issues on every employee’s minds, which may cause anxiousness of one’s own safety at work. Concern for colleague’s wellbeing and uncertainty may cause additional stress, too. Rumours and different, and possibly exaggerated, versions of the events make the situation even worse, so it is important for the management to set the facts straight and give necessary information to the rest of the personnel. An open work community is in everyone’s best interest. Sometimes accidents or threatening situations can be a bonding thing for the work community, too, as shared experiences bring people closer together.

In addition, other employees may be concerned that the victim will avoid any threatening situations in the future to the extreme, thus putting other employees and customers at risk. In the end, safety at workplace is everyone's equal right, but it is also everyone's responsibility to ensure it to others. It is also important that the work community is tight and close enough, so that employees feel safe enough to share their thoughts and fears with colleagues.

### **3 Safety in hotels**

#### **3.1 Hotel as a work environment**

As a work environment hotel is very open and therefore vulnerable. Hotels are full of action and different kinds of people come in and out constantly. It is in constant movement and therefore safety precautions to ensure the safety of the employees are in a big role, and they are different from, e.g. office work environment with limited access via access badges or cards. In a customer-oriented field all safety precautions can not be executed as they would hinder the quality of service significantly. The doors are never fully locked and people can, and need to, come in somewhat freely. Surely, usually hotels keep their doors closed at least during the night, and customers can enter with their key card, but even then it is not certain that outsiders could not sneak in the hotel along with real guests.

Hotel safety is a competitive asset and needs to be considered in everyday processes (Alakoski, Hörkkö & Lappalainen 2006, 127–129), and the lack thereof will drive customers away. Huhtala (2004, 133) identifies hotel and restaurant safety in 4 categories: hotel's corporate safety, personnel safety, customer safety and shared safety of the mentioned parties. Corporate safety includes for example property, trade secrets, confidentiality, and data and money handling. Personnel safety is both physical and mental, and overall well-being and health. Hotel is responsible for protecting customer's physical safety, health, possessions, privacy and managing access to rooms (Rautiainen & Siiskonen 2011, 337). That means access control via key card system and that only the assigned person has the room key, and outsiders should not even know the room number. Shared safety means for example fire, gas leak, bomb threat, terrorist attack, natural disaster and war - threats that concern all parties.

#### **3.2 Threats in hotels**

Each hotel should have a well-planned safety system in case of fire. There should be an alarm system, evacuation plan, fire extinguishers and detectors, and a sprinkler system. A system for communication in emergencies is important in order for the staff to co-

ordinate safety operations with each other and the rescue professionals. An announcement system informs the guests whether or not they need to leave their room. Fire itself is a threat to safety, but also the disorder followed by fire alarms, even false ones. Customers are scared and panicking, and the receptionist has to stay calm in the hassle, while trying to clear the situation.

Terrorist or bomb attacks to hotels are not a problem in Finland, but in many popular tourist locations they cause a big threat. In these areas, different kind of precautions are taken in order to prevent them, such as checking every incoming car for bombs.

Crimes against property in hotels concerns both the hotel as a company, customers and employees (Huhtala, 2004, 133). It can be anything from people leaving the hotel without paying, stealing from the lobby bar, losing their belongings to luggage thieves, or an actual robbery. Thieves target especially hotel breakfast rooms where people often leave their belongings unsupervised, making themselves an easy target.

### **3.3 Violence**

The Finnish Institute of Occupational Health (2010a) ranks hotel and restaurant work as one of the jobs with the highest risk of violence. According to Isotaulus and Saarela (2007, 61), working in customer service, surveillance and supervising jobs increase the risk of violence. Reception work includes all of these aspects. Sometimes receptionist have to witness fights between customers, too, and have to carefully consider whether or not it is safe to intervene and try to break the fight, and risk getting hurt themselves.

Yearly over 110 000 people experience violence or threats of violence at work in Finland (The Finnish Institute of Occupational Health 2010a). According to the Institute (2010b), preventing and decreasing violence at work is organisation's own job, and it is part of the safety culture and safety management of a workplace.

Since only authorized and trained people are allowed to use forcible means, i.e. defence tools, especially women can feel powerless when facing aggressive and clearly physi-

cally stronger people. Security steward (järjestyksenvalvoja in Finnish) training is beneficial for receptionists, as already just the badge from the training can be a deterrent for attacker, and effectively prevent them from taking action. The consequences of attacking a security steward are much greater compared to those of a “regular” employee (Huhtala 2004, 115-116). In addition, being well-prepared and practised is empowering.

An employee has 4 basic rights, which are to protect oneself, escape, call and receive help quickly, and record a threatening situation (Huhtala (2004, 134-135). The reception needs to be planned in a way that the employee has a quick and safe escape route in case there is a violent person. Reception desk should also be positioned so that the staff can monitor the lobby area and the main entrance. In rush hours it is really difficult to observe when there are a lot of people in the lobby, and long queues, in the middle of everything else. With experience the skills to multitask and observe improve.

### **3.4 Handling conflicts**

Conflicts usually start with verbal insults. Hotel receptionist’s problem solving, communication and interaction skills are vital both in preventing and handling conflicts and risky situations.

Customer servant’s reaction to aggressive, confrontational or belligerent behaviour can either calm the situation to begin with, or cause it to escalate. In order to avoid the situation from escalating, it is best is to disregard the insults and ask the person to leave. The difficulty is that the receptionist should give good customer service, but on the other hand there is a limit which should not be crossed. Even though the receptionist should be professional and keep customer service in mind, customers should not go to personal level and receptionists do not need to listen to insults (Huhtala 2004, 94). Receptionists are there to serve paying customers, but they do not need to accept everything. Customers, too, need to respect personal boundaries. Offensive behaviour, verbal insults and abuse are considered violence at work, as well, and affect employee’s occupational health (The Finnish Institute of Occupational Health 2010a).

### 3.5 The clientele and working alone

Hotel customers vary from leisure to business clients. The clientele varies depending on time of the day, as well. Customers often form the biggest safety risk, whether they are guests staying in the hotel, conference guests or other customers, e.g. lobby bar customers. Receptionist can never know what type of people come to the hotel and it is difficult to keep unwanted outsiders out.

Especially in smaller hotels there is only one receptionist working in shift, and especially at nights. When working alone, there is no support from colleague, and the responsibility for the whole building and all the customers rest on one person. If a guest asks to come and check something in the room, occasionally the reception has to be left unguarded, and in some cases, lobby bar or shop, too, causing a financial threat to the hotel.

Night receptionists sometimes face more threats in their work than those working in morning and evening shifts. As Isotalus and Saarela (2007, 61) mention, an employee is more prone to become a victim of violence when working alone, late at night or early in the morning. There is also less supervision, as there are fewer people working. During the night there are drunk people, fights, misbehaviour and general restlessness. People under the influence of drugs behave in an even more unpredictable way than drunk people, and even the smallest things can make them explode. A nearby taxi stand with people queuing after bars close causes restlessness, too. People often come to hotels asking for a room at nights. Hotels have the right to choose their customers, and it calls for the receptionist's professional skills to recognise if the person is too drunk and likely to cause problems. In those cases it is sometimes better to say that the hotel is full.

The receptionists are also the ones who have to take overly drunk customers to their rooms if they can not make it on their own – security is not called for this purpose only. Being alone with the customer and not having even the reception desk between, the risk of violence or sexual harassment is big.

### **3.6 Communication**

It is important to maintain good communication between different departments in the hotel, not to mention within the reception. There has to be a way to keep everyone informed of what is going on in the hotel, and the next shift needs to be filled in properly at every shift change of potential difficult or threatening customers who might cause problems later.

The reception has a key role in interdepartmental communication, and it is the “hub” of all communication in the hotel. Customers use the reception to get information and to communicate any issues with other departments. As Bardi (2011, 94) mentions, “guests’ needs are met when employees cooperate and communicate to provide hotel services.” The reception also has a big role as a coordinator during emergencies, both for staff and rescue personnel, and guests.



## **4 Research**

### **4.1 Research method**

This thesis is a research-oriented study, and the method used is quantitative research. Quantitative research method is one based on numbers. Aliaha and Gunderson (Muijs 2011,1) define quantitative research as “explaining phenomena by collecting numerical data that are analysed using mathematically based methods (in particular statistics).” Quantitative research was chosen because it allows data collection from a large group of people. It is also very effective and the results can be quickly translated into quantitative form, i.e. numbers, percentages and graphs.

### **4.2 Data collection**

A survey as a data collection method is used. The objective is, with the help of data collected, to describe, compare and explain the phenomenon (Hirsjärvi, Remes, & Sajavaara 2009,134). An essential part of a survey research is a questionnaire, with which the data is collected (Heikkilä 1999, 46). With a well planned and clear questionnaire misunderstandings in answers are lower, as well as the initial willingness to answer the questions (Hirsjärvi et al 2009, 193–195). Especially with a subject as delicate as this, some might not give as honest replies in an interview situation as in an anonymous questionnaire, not willing to share such personal information, or those with negative experiences and possible traumas could not take part in the survey at all. Questionnaire allows a larger take on the target group when compared to interviews, for example. In addition, the questionnaire is exactly the same to everyone, whereas in an interview there are factors that could affect the results, for example restless location or lack of time, as no interview is exactly the same. Using quantitative research method and big sample groups also the error margin is smaller. There are mainly closed questions, but also some open-ended questions allowing more in-depth information. The surveys were conducted in Finnish, and the results translated to English.

Personal observation will be used, as well, since I work at a hotel reception and have firsthand experience in the matter.

I contacted in 16 hotels in the centre area, of different sizes and profiles, that is, hotels from different price and star ranges, giving the research good overall coverage of the hotel scene in Helsinki city centre. After all, the clientele and its structure naturally have a big role when it comes to security issues. 4 hotels did not participate in the survey. The survey was conducted in the beginning of November.

#### **4.3 Reliability and validity of the research**

The results of the survey were transferred to numbers manually, which always includes the risk of human error, such as typing error or miscalculating. The sample group is big enough to make the research valid, as I began to see similar results and answers repeatedly. Some respondents did not fill the open questions at all, and it was clear that some did not put much thought to the answers and a couple respondents had somewhat inconsistent replies. In those situations, interviews would have been useful but I feel that they were just exceptions and did not affect the overall results.

The chosen data collection method was right for this research as the goal was to study the overall situation in Helsinki, and quantitative research allows large sample groups. As Vilkkä mentions (2007, 57), the results are more reliable the bigger the sample group is. The combination of interviews and survey would have been the best option, but unfortunately the strict time limit did not allow me to do both. Interview alone would not have given a broad enough coverage, as time wise I could have only done a few.

Electronic survey would have excluded calculating and typing errors, and it would have been a lot faster to transfer the data to numbers. However, I felt that, especially as reception email is usually flooded with messages and advertisements, it would have been easier for receptionists to disregard and ignore an electronic survey than the paper version.

I got a total of 71 replies from 12 hotels. The response rate was 58,7% which is really good. Open questions were not answered as much as I would have liked, which is why it would have been good to combine a few interviews with the questionnaire survey.

## 5 Results

### 5.1 Background information

77,5% of the respondents were women, and 22,5% men. Most were 20-29 years old as shown in the Figure 1 below.

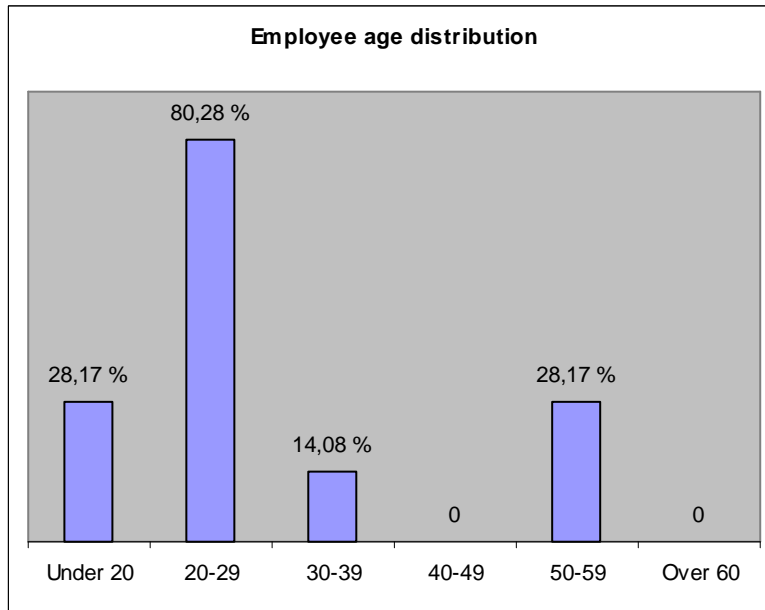


Figure 1. Employee age

Figure 2 on the next page illustrates the respondents' work experience as a receptionist. 17% had worked for less than a year, 49% for 1-5 years, 24% for 6-10 years, 6% for 11-15 years and 4% for over 15 years.

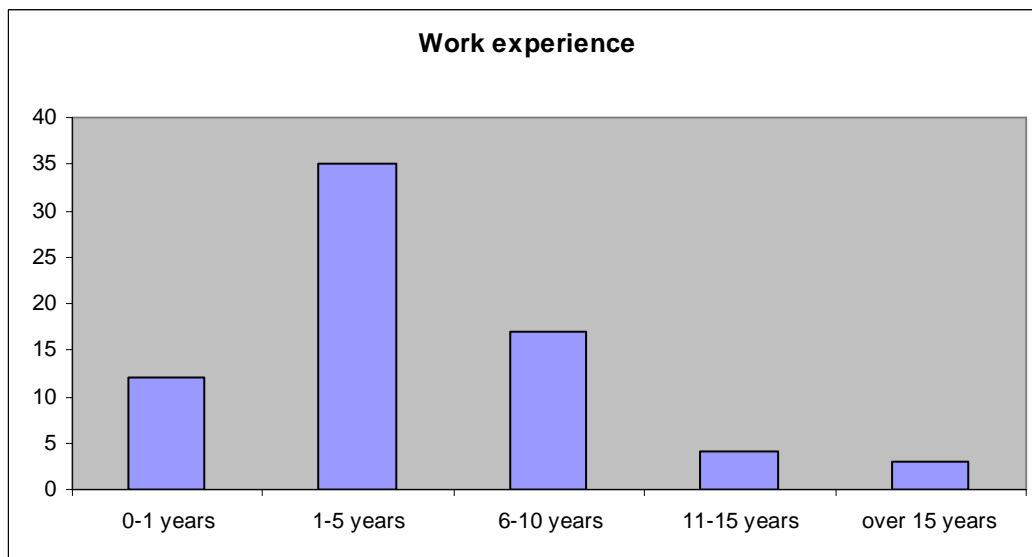


Figure 2. Work experience as a receptionist in years

Figure 3 below shows how well-prepared employees feel that their work place is for emergencies or threatening situations in their opinion. 11,3% of the respondents said very well, 67,6% quite well, 7,0% I do not know, and 14,1% quite poorly. No one answered very poorly which is positive.

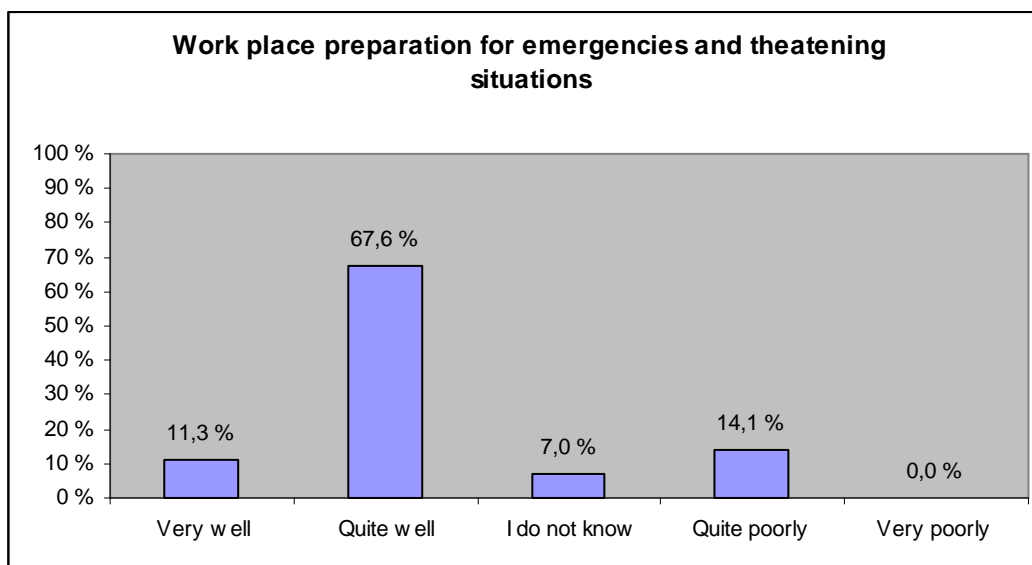


Figure 3. Employee estimate of how well their work place is prepared for emergencies and threatening situations in their opinion.

In question 7, the respondents were asked about the safety trainings that they have had, and the results are shown in Figure 4. Most had had fire training, but less than half had first aid or threatening situation training experience. Other training that 4,2% had had was defibrillator and safety pass trainings. It would be important to have defibrillator training as a part of first aid, since it is an efficient way to potentially save a life. However, not all hotels have this device.

It is important to have a comprehensive training repertoire in order to be able to prepare for different kind of challenging situations, but only 16,9% had had all 4 trainings. 15,5% had received 3 types of training, and 16,9% had 2 types of training. 19,7% of the respondents had had only 1 type of safety training. 15,5% had no training at all, which is a big share, but over half of them were trainees. When trainees are excluded from the calculations, the actual share of no training is 7,7%, which is less alarming.

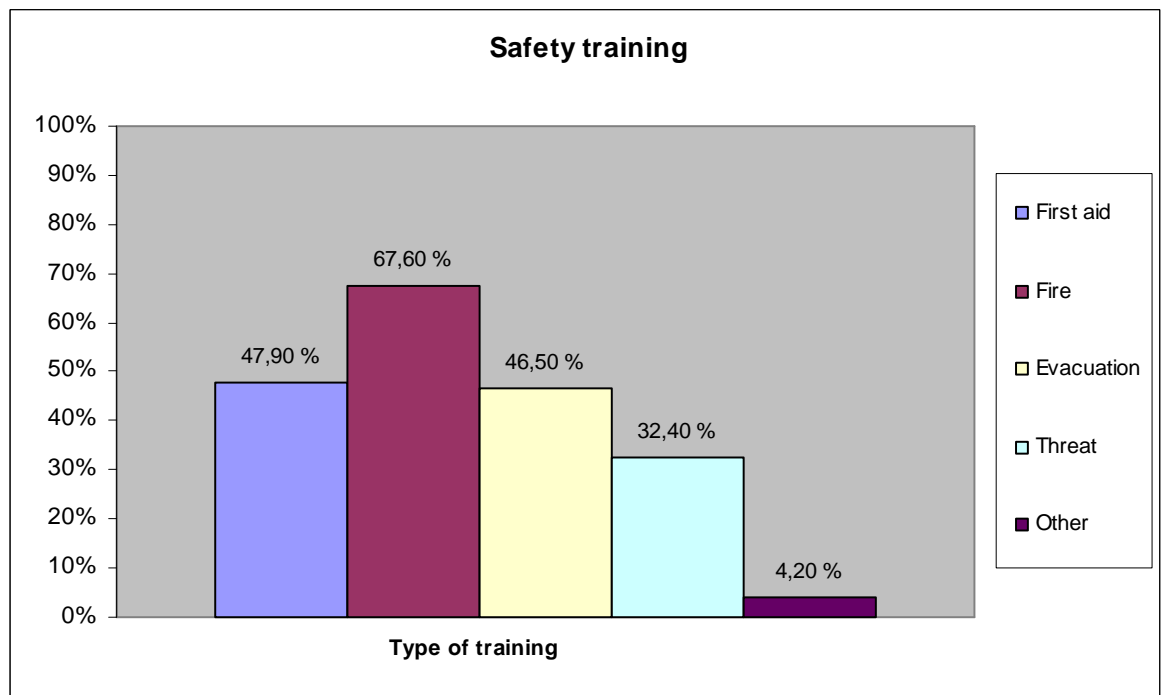


Figure 4. The types and number of safety trainings that the receptionists have received at their work.

## 5.2 Safety evaluation

In question 8, the receptionists were asked about their confidence in their abilities to act in emergencies and threatening situations, on a scale from 1 to 10. Average confidence in one's abilities was 7,5. The average for men was 8,67, whereas women average was significantly lower at 7,18.

Those who had full 10 confidence in themselves were all men, but they were also the ones with the longest work experience as a receptionist, so the experience they have gained explains the best confidence, naturally. 45% of those with lowest trust (6 or less) had not had any training. Those who had not had safety training at all estimated their abilities with the average of 5,90. From the results, it can be stated that the lack of training affects directly to employees confident in their ability to act successfully in emergencies and threatening situations.

The respondents estimated their work place safety the average of 7,80.

In question 10 the receptionists were asked how big of a risk they consider certain threats to be, and how they score them (1= not a risk, 2= small risk, 3= quite big risk, 4= big risk). In the figure 5 on the next page, the different types of risks are shown, and how big of a threat they are considered to be. Misbehaving and disorderly customers is the biggest risk, and as a respondent said, "for women it is impossible to defend yourself or throw them (misbehaving people) out, especially if they are aggressive." Next biggest risks in receptionists' opinion are drunk customers, drug users and threatening. Working alone is a fairly big risk, and one respondent even said that "sometimes working alone causes anxiety." Night shift is surprisingly less of a threat than working alone, even though in many places they are basically the same thing, i.e. they work alone in night shifts. Violence and fire are considered a small risk. Bomb and terrorism are not considered a threat.

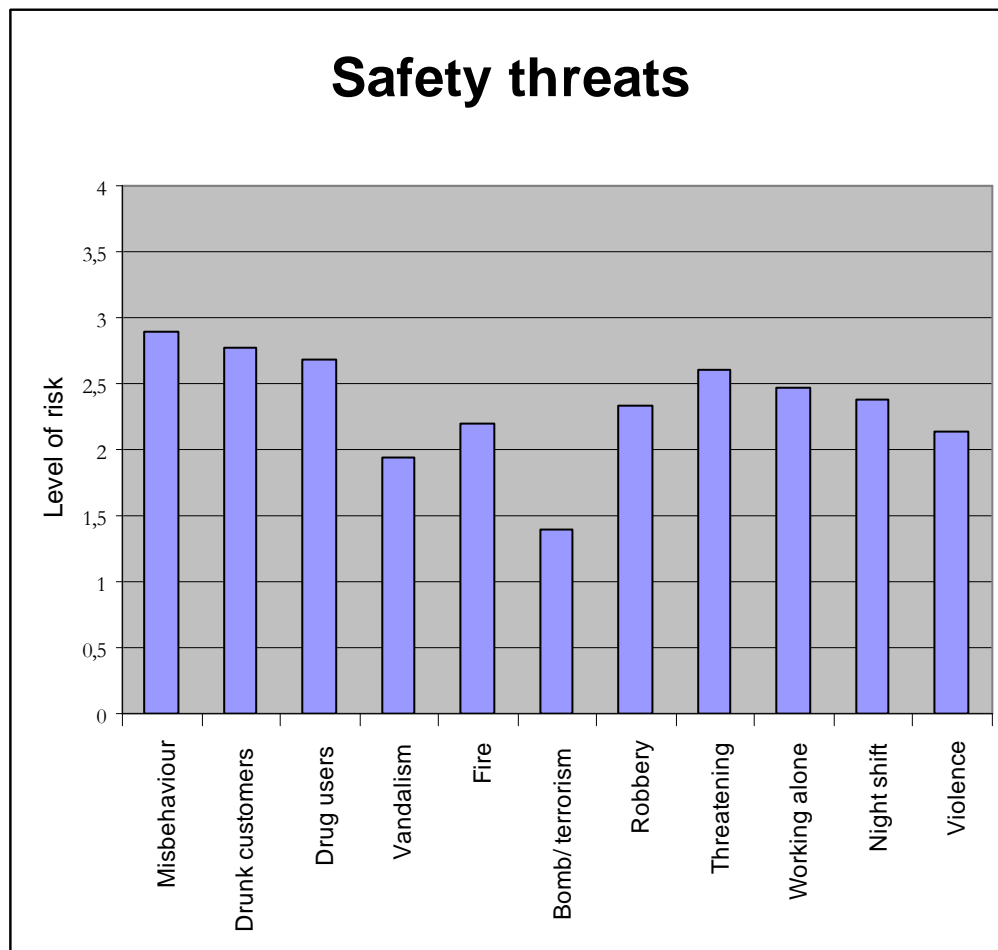


Figure 5. Safety risks in reception. Level of risk 1= not a risk, 2= small risk, 3= quite big risk, 4= big risk).

### 5.3 Other factors affecting safety in hotels

The question 11 discussed other factors that receptionist may feel that increase or decrease their feeling of safety at work place. Many mentioned that the central location attracts unwanted people who are sometimes threatening, working alone has increased, and security response time is sometimes too long. Fire itself is naturally a problem, but also the disorder followed by false fire alarms. Locking of doors and gates in some places does not always work as impeccably as they definitely should, and some respondents felt that it is difficult to supervise entrances. Unprofessional colleagues and their inability to act in emergencies or threatening situations decreases safety, but also the level of support received. cursory orientation to safety guidelines and lack of practice were mentioned as factors causing lowered feeling of safety. The lack of full-time

guard and basically free access to reception and back office affect safety in a negative way.

Good work community, good security systems and operations, not having to work alone, trust in themselves and colleagues were mentioned as positive things. Two respondents felt that central location actually increased safety, as there are always people around to help, and also a lot of polices in the area. A well-trained staff increases safety, as “someone always knows how to help in threatening situations, or if your own knowledge is not enough”. Having well-organized safety plans, emergency buttons, and safety and radio phones were also mentioned as adding safety.

#### **5.4 Violence and threatening experiences in hotel reception**

The Figure 6 illustrates what physical and verbal attacks receptionists have experienced in their work. 25,4% had experienced physical attacks, i.e. pushing, hitting, kicking or grabbing. That is an alarmingly big number; every fourth. 14,1% had had only verbal insults or threats, but they are still considered violence at work. Only 11,3% had not experienced any kind of conflicts at work, no physical or verbal. Interestingly, one respondent felt that threatening situations are “a part of job description.”

In addition, customers have made sexual propositions or nasty comments with an “attitude” to some respondents. Some mentioned having experienced weird and disoriented behaviour, which they felt was uncomfortable or even threatening.



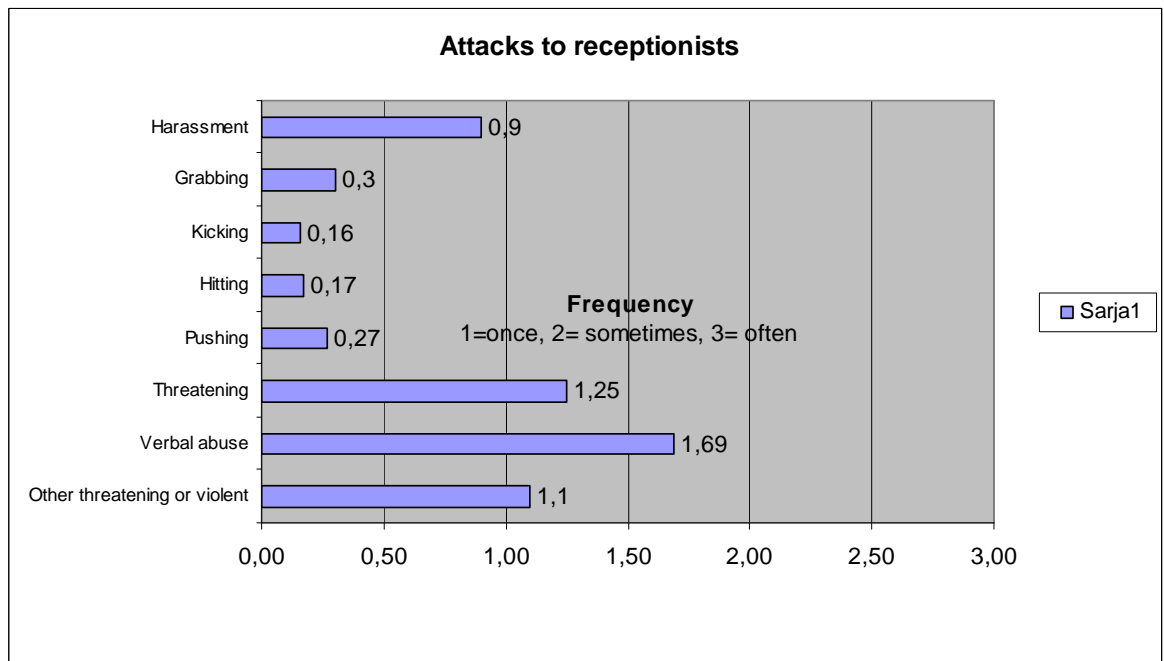


Figure 6. Physical and verbal attacks that receptionists have experienced in their work

In question 14, the respondents were asked to describe a typical threatening situation or a customer. All the answers mentioned alcohol involvement. A typical situation is a drunk customer who wants a room. They are told the hotel is full, but they do not listen to orders, refuse to leave, and give an attitude, and threat and insult. Drunk customers are described as unpredictable and therefore a threat, as well. A typical threatening situation is when a homeless or a mentally unstable by-passer asks to use the toilet etc, and then loiters and stays in the reception, and refuses to leave. Unsatisfied and over-reacting customers are sometimes threatening if they are aggressive and short-tempered, too, according to respondents.

### 5.5 Affects of threats to occupational health and the work community

Surprisingly, 81,4% of the participants in the survey said that their work ability or well-being are not affected by threatening situations. However, everyone experience threatening situations differently, some are more affected than others - same ways as safety is perceived individually. Some have had problems with sleep, nightmares, concentration problems, stress, anxiety, nervousness, timidity, trauma, and fear. One respondent even said that “after situations I do not like coming to work and they mainly affect my mood.”

The results of question 13 in the Figure 7 show that the occupational health care services have been successful in supporting victims of violence at work. 25,0% felt like they got quite a lot of help and support, and 18,8% got a lot of help. 3,8% said that they did not get a lot of help. 18,8% of respondents said that they did not get any help. However, it is possible they did not feel the need to seek for help at all.

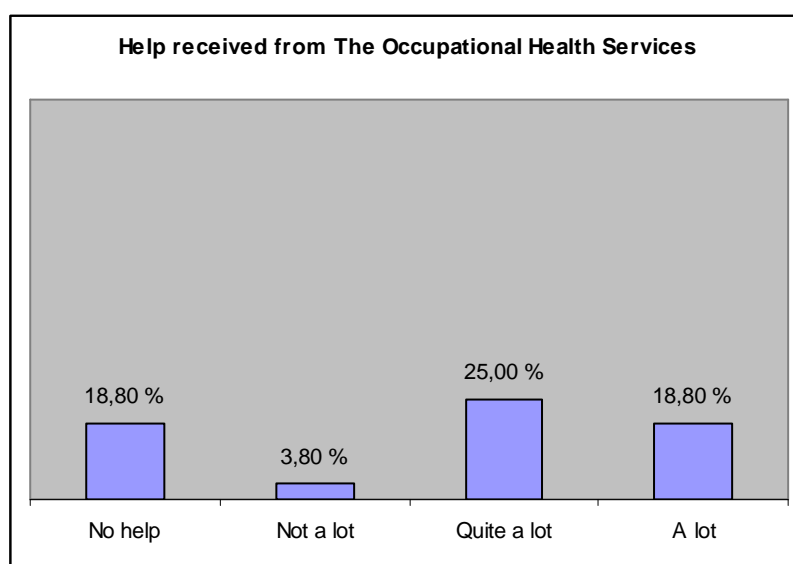


Figure 7. The amount of help received from The Occupational Health Services in case of violent experiences.

In question 16, the receptionists were asked about the affects that a colleague's violent experience at work had on them and the work community. It increased the feeling of insecurity. Some respondents had become concerned if it could happen to them, too, and a bit paranoid and scared of things they maybe had not even considered dangerous earlier. Many felt compassion and empathy towards a colleague, and worried about how they are coping.

Several respondents said that after an incident, they started to pay better attention to their surroundings and keep a better eye on customers, and to look for suspicious and potentially harmful people. That said, accidents are also a reminder to employees and management of the importance of safety, and encourage everyone to improve it.

One respondent was not happy with the way the work community reacted, disregarding the situation and did nothing concrete to keep it from happening again, and belittled and understated the victim's feelings.

When asked about the support given by colleagues in threatening situations, most respondents mentioned that usually already the colleague's presence, alone, is enough to bring safety and reassurance, courage and calmness. Colleagues give moral and physical support and help in emergencies or threatening situations, and can call for help if needed. When a receptionist does not have to face difficult customers alone, but responsibility is shared, the situations are less stressful, as well. Afterwards, talking and going through the events with colleagues helps, as one gets to share their feelings and experiences. Work community gives peer support and a forum for open discussion, and also advice and tips on how to act in the future. From a general perspective, they act as a safety net when one's own abilities or knowledge is not enough.

Some respondents mentioned they miss having support when working alone. They can not share their feelings and experiences, either. Therefore, working alone affects not only in terms of safety, but in the support aspect too.

## Conclusion

One of the most important improvements for safety in hotel receptions are decreasing working alone time, and having more safety training and regular recaps for old employees. A more thorough orientation to safety matters to new employees is needed. A clear and consistent safety policy and guidance, specified plans for emergencies and different kind of situations, are crucial as well. Threatening situations training, and easier ways to call for help in emergencies are vital for increasing safety, too.

One respondent summarized the importance of safety preparations: “You never know how you would act in a real emergency, but if you are well-prepared and you have practiced, it is easier to face these situations. Practicing and preparing yourself for the worst case scenario create mental safety, I am more peaceful and not stressed about them, and situations do not scare me that much anymore. Not knowing and not being able to do something are the worst, especially when you are responsible for others.”

Security systems, for example locking of every door and gate and the camera system need to be updated and maintained regularly to ensure that they work impeccably at all times. Overall, there should be more security cameras, and the possibility to follow cameras from the reception. Receptionists should have a radio phone for communication with each other when going to other parts of the hotel. A lobby guard at the reception, especially in the evenings and nights on weekends, would increase safety significantly, and decrease disorderly behaviour. This was a popular wish among the respondents, too.

Reception area should be designed so that only employees have access behind the counter and the back office, by having access control through key cards or a code. A phone to the main entrance for communicating with people trying to enter the hotel at nights would increase safety a lot, because that way it would be easier to prevent unwanted people from entering the hotel in the first place.

I got a lot more responses to the survey than I could have anticipated. The results of the research were better than I had expected, i.e. receptionists feel safer than I would have thought. Afterwards, I feel that there should have been also a question about situations that made the respondent feel uncomfortable or anxious. The timing of the survey affected the results, surely, as the clientele mainly consists of business people in November. A bit later, during the busiest Christmas party season, when there are more problems with disorder and misbehaviour, the results may not have been as positive. When situations and feelings are fresh in one's mind, the answers are different, too. Had the survey been done in the summer, the results would have probably been a bit different, as well, as the clientele has a big role in safety issues.

I got a lot of positive feedback on the subject of my thesis. Several people told me that it is really good that someone is doing research on this, and raising awareness on the issue and hopefully evoking more discussion on it – and encourage management to take proactive actions, rather than waiting for something to happen before acting on gaps in occupational safety. People were also interested in seeing the results of the survey.

On the next page, I have gathered respondents' answers and my personal observations and brought them together as a short guide for receptionists for dealing with threatening situations and customers.

- Always keep radio phone in your hand, not in pockets: this is for you own feel of safety and you can call for help faster, but it also brings authority, and shows the threatening customer that you are in charge.
- Be in control of your surroundings: keep distance and always walk after the person, so that they will not be able to surprise you from behind.
- Keep your gestures and movements slow and you hands at sight. Do not make sudden moves or raise your voice.
- Remain calm in emergencies or threatening situations; others will be calmer, too.
- In order to avoid the situation from escalating, it is best to disregard insults; do not take them personally and get provoked. Sometimes people are just looking to cause reactions and a fight, but if you do not get involved in the argument, it ends before it even started.
- Know when you can not handle the situation yourself; call for help early enough, before the situation gets out of hands. Sometimes just the mention of a guard or police resolves the situation.
- Support your colleague; just standing next to them when they are dealing with a difficult customer helps the colleague and the situation as it brings authority, as well.
- Educate your colleagues of practices you have found useful, share your experiences.
- Familiarize yourself with the safety policies, equipment and systems, so that you know what to do by heart when something happens.

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## Attachments

### Attachment 1: Questionnaire



Hei!

Opiskelen HAAGA-HELIA ammattikorkeakoulussa matkailua, ja teen opinnäytetyöni Helsingin ydinkeskustan vastaanottovirkailijoiden työturvallisuudesta.

Kyselylomakkeen avulla kartoitan vastaanottotyössä koettuja riskejä, uhkatilanteita ja niiden vaikutuksia työntekijään. Pyydän, että käytät muutaman minuutin ajastasi ja vastaat oheisiin kysymyksiin. Avoimissa kysymyksissä voit tarvittaessa jatkaa vastaustasi paperin toiselle puolelle.

Vastaukset käsitellään luottamuksellisesti, eikä hotellin nimeä tulla mainitsemaan opinnäytetyössä. Vastausaikaa on 13.11.2013 asti.

Kiitos ajastasi!

Ann-Mari Hämäläinen

restonomiopiskelija, HAAGA-HELIA Ammattikorkeakoulu, Porvoo

## Kysely vastaanottovirkailijoille: Työturvallisuus ja uhkatilanteet työssä

### 1. Ikä

- a) alle 20    b) 20–29    c) 30–39    d) 40–49    e) 50–59    f) yli 60

### 2. Sukupuoli

- a) nainen    b) mies

### 3. Työkokemus vastaanottovirkailijana

- a) alle 1 v.    b) 1–5 v.    c) 6–10 v.    d) 11–15 v.    e) yli 15 vuotta

### 4. Työsuhteesi muoto

- a) vakituinen    b) osa-aikainen    c) määräaikainen    d) sesonkityöntekijä    e) harjoittelija

### 5. Missä työvuoroissa työskentelet? Ympyröi sopivat vaihtoehdot.

- a) aamu    b) ilta    c) yö

### 6. Miten työpaikallasi on mielestäsi varauduttu hätätilanteisiin tai uhkaaviin tilanteisiin (turvallisuusjärjestelmät, kamerat, turvahenkilöstö, turvallisuuskoulutus ym.)?

- a) erittäin hyvin    b) melko hyvin    c) en osaa sanoa    d) melko huonosti    e) hyvin huonosti

### 7. Millaista turvallisuuskoulutusta olet saanut työssäsi?

- a) ensiapukoulutus    b) paloturvallisuuskoulutus    c) poistumiskoulutus    d) uhkatilannekoulutus  
e) muu, mikä?    f) en ole saanut turvallisuuskoulutusta

### 8. Miten paljon luotat omiin taitoihisi toimia oikein hätätilanteissa tai uhkaavissa tilanteissa asteikolla 1-10? (1=hyvin vähän, 10=hyvin paljon)

- 1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10

### 9. Miten turvalliseksi koet työpaikkasi asteikolla 1-10? (1=hyvin turvaton, 10=hyvin turvallinen)

- 1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10

**Miksi?****10. Mitkä ovat mielestäsi suurimmat turvallisuusriskit työssäsi?**

(1= ei riski, 2= pieni riski, 3= melko iso riski, 4= iso riski)

asiakkaiden häiriökäyttäytyminen	1	2	3	4
humalaiset asiakkaat	1	2	3	4
huumeidenkäyttäjät	1	2	3	4
ilkivalta	1	2	3	4
tulipalo	1	2	3	4
pommiuhka/ terrorismi	1	2	3	4
ryöstö	1	2	3	4
uhkailu	1	2	3	4
yksintyöskentely	1	2	3	4
yötyöskentely	1	2	3	4
väkivalta	1	2	3	4

**11. Onko joitakin muita tekijöitä tai asioita jotka luovat turvattomuuden tunnetta työssäsi tai työpaikallasi?****12. Oletko kokenut asiakkaiden toimesta seuraavia:**

(1=kerran, 2=joskus, 3= usein, 4=ei koskaan)

solvausta	1	2	3	4
uhkailua	1	2	3	4
tönimistä	1	2	3	4
lyömistä	1	2	3	4
potkimista	1	2	3	4
käsiksi käymistä	1	2	3	4
ahdistelua	1	2	3	4
muuten uhkaavaa tai väkivaltaista käytöstä	1	2	3	4

**muuta, mitä?**

**13. Jos olet kokenut työssäsi väkivaltaa, saitko riittävää hoitoa ja tukea tapahtuman jälkeen työpaikan/ työterveydenhuollon puolesta?**

(1= en lainkaan, 2= melko vähän, 3=melko paljon, 4= paljon)

1      2      3      4

**14. Kuvaile kokemustesi perusteella tyypillinen uhkaava tilanne tai asiakas.**

**15. Vaikuttavatko uhkaavat tilanteet työkykyysi ja yleiseen hyvinvointiisi?**

a) kyllä              b) ei

**Jos vastasit a, kuvaile miten ne vaikuttavat työkykyysi ja hyvinvointiisi.**

**16. Jos työkaverisi on kokenut uhkatilanteita tai väkivaltaa työpaikalla, miten se vaikutti sinuun ja työyhteisöön?**

**17. Koetko saavasi työkavereiltasi apua ja tukea hätätilanteissa tai uhkaavissa tilanteissa? Miten?**

**18. Miten työpaikkasi turvallisuutta voitaisiin mielestäsi parantaa?**

**Kiitos vastauksistasi!**